

## **Early Phases of Segregation in Cairo, Illinois**

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How was Cairo, Illinois affected by the civil unrest in the United States during the 1960s?

Cairo, Illinois is located at the southern tip of Illinois. The Ohio River and Mississippi River join in this small agricultural and industrial community. Riverboat traffic added to its steady growth.

In 1820, twenty black slaves were brought to this site, beginning a long history of injustice for black residents. The population of blacks increased due to a steady migration from southern states.

Issues of racial segregation began early, despite Illinois laws forbidding it. Blacks were banned from theaters, restaurants, and other public places. The Illinois Civil Rights Act of 1885 forbade discrimination against blacks in public places. The Free Schools Act of 1909 forbade segregation on account of color, race, or nationality. In 1918, a local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was formed in Cairo.

In the 1960s many cities across the country were involved with a racial tug of war. The riots, marches, and growing violence in Chicago, fueled the social unrest in Cairo as well as the rest of the state.

The U. S. Census in 1960 reported thirty-nine percent of Cairo's population was black. Despite this percentage of blacks and all the civil rights laws in place in Illinois, inequality and segregation of blacks continued.

Many blacks boycotted stores that would not hire them. A public swimming pool denied black swimmers. In 1967, the hanging of a local soldier, Robert Hunt, in a Cairo police station, escalated the violence in this once quiet town. This violence prompted the Illinois National Guard to be called in to restore order.

A letter written by Preston Ewing, Jr., Cairo's NAACP president, to Adlai Stevenson, the state treasurer, reported that Cairo banks would not hire blacks. Stevenson told the banks they must hire blacks or the state would remove its money from them.

In 1968, the Burkhart Factory, Cairo's largest industry, practiced racial discrimination. Also, little league baseball was canceled to keep black children from playing. To further segregate white and black students, a private all-white school was started.

Throughout 1969, black citizens could not gather at sports activities, in local parks, or form marches without being threatened by local police or the White Hat vigilante group. This group was organized by Alexander Peyton Berbling.

To counteract the White Hats, the United Front of Cairo, a coalition of black organizations was formed. It started to boycott white businesses.

In April 1969, Lieutenant Governor Paul Simon and a special committee appointed by the Illinois House of Representatives began to investigate the events occurring in Cairo. The Illinois General Assembly ordered the White Hats to disband and for the enforcement of civil rights laws and racial integration of city and county departments.

Even though the state government became involved, white residents continued to hold mass meetings in public parks and blacks held civil rights rallies in churches. Three local newspapers, the *Cairo Evening Citizen*, the *Southern Illinoisan*, and the *East St. Louis Monitor* helped influence how people looked at the events that occurred. The information portrayed either a pro-white or pro-black newspaper prospective.

A group of United Front members went to the state capital on July 7, 1969, to ask the governor for help with the segregation and inequality that persisted in Cairo. However, they were refused admittance to Governor Ogilvie's office and were arrested by state police.

In September 1969, the mayor of Cairo issued a statement prohibiting the gathering of two or more people, all marches, and picketing. In turn, a federal court ruled this proclamation unconstitutional. Throughout October 1969, violence against black protesters continued. It appeared that federal and state involvement was ineffective in controlling the continued segregation and inequality of Cairo's, as well as other Illinois community's black citizens. [From E. Bernhard, I. Latimer, and H. O'Conner, *Pursuit of Freedom*; M. A. Haven, C. B. Hobson, and K. B. Ward, *The Effects of White Newspaper Coverage on Civil Rights Activities in a Smaller Community*; J. R. Ralph, Jr., *Northern Protest*; and J. P. Roddy, *Let My People Go*.]